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"THERE'S RANSOM IN A VOICE"
(Emily Dickinson, Poem # 1251)

PAT SCHNEIDER, Keynote Address
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It is my honor and privilege to be with you this morning, not only to share my own story and thoughts, but on behalf of the four women who have come with me, and the more than 500 men and women around the world who have been trained by us and now co-create with us the approach to creativity that we want to share with you.

We know that you are artists, art teachers and administrators. We know that you share with us a concern for creation. Not only "creation" in the meaning of the world out there -- sky and sea, mountain and valley, farmland and desert -- but also creation in here, in the heart and mind of every human being on this earth. Those of us gathered here care about art, and what we mean by art is that mystery of the human spirit that the ancient prophets of Israel called being "created in God's image." We mean the mystery that we are all created to be creators. I want to tell you my story, and out of the story, weave together the things I have learned about art, about creating, and about helping others to create.

When I was eleven years old, I lived with my brother and my mother in one basement room in St. Louis. There was one bed, and a coal stove. There was no closet. It was so dark, so bad, so scary, so impossible, my mother put my brother and me into an orphanage. When she was packing my things for the orphanage, she gave me a five-year diary -- one of those little books with about four lines for each day of five years. She told me I might want to write something down while I was there.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "Silence is all we dread./ There's Ransom in a Voice."

When I came home from the orphanage, Mama had found a better place to live. It was two rooms on the third floor of a tenement. My grandmother lived with us; my brother was in a foster home. Eight families used one bathroom that no one cleaned. No screens on the windows in that hot, muggy river bottom air. Maggots in the canned peas on the stove. Mama too depressed to do anything but work and sleep. Grandma eighty-five and sick. Nobody cleaned anything. Outside the bathroom, in the hallway, I waited in line behind Mr. Costello, who carried his milk bottle full of pee. Nobody spoke to anybody. When it was my turn, I would go into the bathroom and lock the door. I would step on top of the toilet and squat on the toilet seat to pee because it was so filthy I didn't want to touch it with my flesh. Even though the whole room was like that, I would imagine that it might be my own room. I would sleep in the bathtub. A room of my own. a room with a lock on the door.

When I was twelve, I sat in the window of one of our two rooms on third floor, and looked down at the street. Streetcars ran there, and at night they were like tin cans full of light rattling along. From my dark window I could see people inside, and I focused on the women. I thought they were wearing fur coats and were on their way downtown to the opera. I hated them with a pure and perfect hatred, because they could see me in that dark window. I vowed that when I grew up I would get out of there, and I would never forget. I would never ride by a house like mine and forget the child that is behind the window.

When I grew up, I realized that women in fur coats did not ride streetcars to the opera. Those women on the streetcars were wearing fake fur, and they were on their way to night-shift jobs. They came from behind windows not so different from my own.

I want to tell you just a little about how I got out, and then I want to tell you about Amherst Writers & Artists, how we are helping to give voice to the voiceless.

I got out by being privileged. Privilege comes in many forms. Sometimes it's money. Money to go to school. Money to have the clothes you need to stay in school. Money to buy time so all your energy doesn't have to go to sheer survival.

I was in seventh grade when I came home from the orphanage. The orphanage was a privilege, because when I came home I could see that our stairs at home were dirty, not polished and shining with light as they had been in the orphanage. I could see that I did not have a bed of my own, as I did in the orphanage. The only way I could even imagine having one in my home was sleeping in a filthy community bathtub. I could see when I came home from the order of the orphanage that I was surrounded by chaos. In that desperate place, my home, I knew I had one thing that would save me: words.

My seventh grade teacher asked us to write an autobiography, and then she told us what an autobiography is. I wrote the story of my life in ten handwritten pages, and she gave it back to me with these words written on it: "You can be a writer." And she did more than that; she involved herself in my life. She walked up three flights of tenement stairs and knocked on my door. I wouldn't let her in; the rooms were too dirty. She handed me her own book, and she said through the crack in the door, "I know what you will be when you grow up." I said, "What?" She said, "I won't tell you now, but call me when you are grown, I will tell you if I was right."

Sometimes privilege comes in the form of one person who says, "You can be a writer." Or a painter. Or a dancer. Or any kind of artist.

My brother was fifteen months younger than me. Until the day he died, two years ago, he was my best friend. I adored him. When Mama put us into the orphanage, it was bearable because Sam was there. Then they sent Sam home and Mama put him in a social workers hands and he was put into several foster homes and then into another orphanage and when he got to be seventeen the orphanage advised him to join the army. He did, and got kicked out of it and I don't have time to tell you that whole story, but it's in my book, *Wake Up Laughing*. Years later, when I was in my thirties, Sam was an alcoholic "drifter." That's what they called homeless people then: "drifters." He came to see me one day when we were both in our thirties, and I knew he was a little better than usual because he had one small suitcase. Usually he had nothing. As we talked, Sam said "I want to show you something", and he took a folded-up piece of paper from his wallet and handed it to me. On it, illegibly scrawled in pencil, was the beginning of a story titled "Motorcyclists From Hell." It was Sam's story. It was about being chased by alcoholism.
I read it out loud to him, knowing as I read that I was probably the only person on earth who could read Sam's writing. And as I read it, I had a huge revelation. It was good. It was perhaps even great writing. He was as much an artist as I would ever be, but no one would know, because he couldn't type, he couldn't spell, and his handwriting was terrible.

Amherst Writers & Artists began that day, although it would be ten more years before I told the story of Sam's visit in an application for a Danforth Foundation Grant, and said I wanted to teach writing in a way

that would value all voices, not just those who are privileged by formal education. I got the grant, and used it to complete an MFA at the University of Massachusetts. And then Amherst Writers & Artists began to take form as leaders emerged out of my writing workshops, and we dreamed and worked toward a new and more compassionate methodology for writing together than any of us had experienced in the workshops and writing programs we had previously attended. We invented as we worked, without knowing that in other parts of the country other people like Peter Elbow were also carving out a different vision for writers and teachers of writing. Over time, AWA developed and grew into its many facets: a literary journal, a literary press, workshops and retreats for writers.

I was leading writing workshops for people who could pay me, and I was doing good and important work, developing a method of writing workshop where every voice is valued and every person is affirmed as a writer. I became published, I had my MFA. I had kept the vow to myself that I made at age twelve in that tenement window in St. Louis. "I will get out of here." I also kept the vow, "I will never forget." But I knew that "not forgetting" meant more than just holding the memory, and I didn't know what to do about that shadowy child. I had no idea how to reach even one of the countless children that I knew were watching me behind tenement and housing project windows in every city in America.

It was a young social worker in Chicopee, Massachusetts, who started me toward the answer. She asked me if I would come lead a workshop for women from the housing projects in that old mill town. I tell you the truth; I was very nervous. Not because I didn't want to do it – because it rattled the cage that I was in as a child. The vow I had made. I had not forgotten the passion and the need of that child. What if I couldn't keep my promise. What if I failed? I am deeply distressed by the policy of my country toward the arts. I am passionately angry at my country for making war on other nations instead of making war on the poverty that creates violence, here and everywhere in this world. I know that most if not all of you share that distress and that anger. I am not here to talk about national policy today. It was Miss Dunn, in seventh grade, who saved my sanity if not my life by saying "You can be a writer." I am here to talk about what each one of us this room can do. But let me make this clear: I am not suggesting that acting as private citizens or as local arts organizations can solve the global problem. If we are going to survive on this planet, our government has to change its priorities from capitalist greed and national selfishness to profound interdependence and reverence for all people on the planet.

In the meantime, how is it possible for one person privileged with art to change the life of one person who has been denied it? There are five things that I believe we have to do:

First, we have to affirm that art belongs to everyone and every one is capable of creating art. We are every one born in the image of creator – we are every one born with a passion to create. If we cannot have voice in art, we express ourselves in destruction. Those artists who have no access to canvas and paint will spray paint on subway walls. Those young builders with blocks who are denied training as architects will blow up buildings others have built. That's what happens to a dream deferred. It dries like a raison in the sun, or it explodes in violence. But "There's Ransom in a Voice".

Second, we have to get rid of the idea of "talent". There is no such thing as talent. There is *need* – the need to create, and everyone has it. And there is *privilege*, the privilege that makes creating more possible for some than for others. Not everyone has it.

Stop looking for talent. It doesn't exist. Because like fundamentalist religion, where if I am "saved" there are others who are "unsaved." if I am "talented", there are others who lack talent. There is no such thing as "talent." What there is, is an enormous, incalculable potential in every human being that is beyond

measure and beyond comprehension. As teachers, do not look for talent. Look for break through, break out, the coming forth of that which has been driven down into hiding by shame and denial. Be patient. Believe in the other. Say "You can…" "You are . . ." Not because you see evidence of it, but because you believe with all your heart, even without any evidence, that it is there, potential, latent, hiding.

Third, we have to cross the tracks. It is not enough to ride by on the streetcar. It is not enough to be in a safe and comfortable apartment or house, reading about social problems and voting on voting day. We have to put our bodies face to face and voice to voice with those who need to hear us say "You can be a writer. You can be an artist." And we need to go back again and again until someone we have said it to, believes it and has support in making it come to pass. It is not easy work. It is not quick work. But it is the most ecstatic work in the world. It is perhaps the highest of all art forms –- to reach out and create an artist.

Fourth, we need a method. You can develop your own, as the Chicopee women and I have done, or you can buy our books and our DVD (which by the way, contains the film you just saw plus exercises and interviews) and adapt our method to your own work. We have been developing the Amherst Writers & Artists method for more than 25 years. It has grown now to a national and international movement with hundreds of people using it in different kinds of populations from educated graduate students to illiterate adults, from incarcerated women and men to professional people struggling with cancer. It has been used with the blind in Ireland and in a refugee camp on the border of Kenya and Somalia. I would like to tell you more about it, but Kate and Robin, Susan and Karen, who will introduce themselves in a moment, will tell you more in our break-out groups.

Last, we have to be patient. It may not ever be given to us at all to know the effects of what we have done. Remember that I told you how Miss Dunn came to my door in the tenement and talked to me through the narrow crack? How I held the door almost closed so she wouldn't see behind me? Remember that she told me she knew what I would be when I grew up, and if I called her when I grew up, she would tell me if she was right? I didn't tell you that I never saw her again, after that day. Well, when my libretto was sung by Phyllis Bryn Julson, accompanied by the Robert Shaw orchestra, in Carnegie Hall, I called the Board of Education in St. Louis and asked for the telephone number of Dorothy Dunn. They said she died five years after she knocked on my apartment door. I could not ask Miss Dunn what she thought I would be when I grew up, and I never will know whether she had hope for that kid behind the crack in the door, or whether she despaired. We have to be patient. We have to give, and give again, and be willing not ever to know the difference our giving makes.

Then again, perhaps Miss Dunn does know. *Do you know, Miss Dunn? If you don't, look me up, when I get there and I will tell you what I became when I grew up, and you can tell me if you were right.*